

Excerpt from the 2012 American Red Cross Disaster Mental Health Handbook (pages 4-11 through 4-13)

Post-Deployment Support

Purpose of post-deployment support

Disaster workers on deployment often experience the sights, smells and sounds of the disaster and feel the impact in the same way as the people in the community. As a result, it is common for workers to have reactions, even strong reactions, to the disaster. These reactions will vary among individuals in type, onset and duration. Mental health support after a disaster aims to assist workers with coping, long-term well-being and personal growth. As a means of facilitating effective emotional support after disaster assignments, the DMH activity has developed post-deployment support guidance.

“Coping with Disaster: Returning Home from a Disaster Assignment” is a post-deployment handout for all disaster workers. It contains useful information about issues relevant to winding down from a disaster response. Some of the following information on post-deployment support comes from this document. Post-deployment support is provided by DMH at a relief operation, at the local chapter after deployment, or after DAT responses.

Goals of post-deployment DMH support

The goal of post-deployment DMH support is to assist workers as they do the following:

- Successfully transition back to their pre-deployment lives and routines; and
- Begin to incorporate their deployment experience into their lives in a meaningful way.

Principles for DMH workers providing post-deployment support

When delivering post-deployment support, DMH workers should adhere to the following principles:

- Participation in post-deployment support should always be voluntary.
- While it is usually offered by DMH at the end of a relief operation, post-deployment support should also be offered by DMH at the home chapter after deployments.
- The time and place of a contact should be convenient and suitable for the disaster worker.
- Post-deployment support contacts should not be debriefings in any form, nor should they specifically aim to elicit workers’ feelings.
- Post-deployment support will most typically be provided in an individual one-to-one format.
- When provided in a group, post-deployment support should be psychoeducational and discussion oriented. (Note: This is the only acceptable Red Cross DMH group intervention format; Critical Incident Stress Debriefing is not an approved DMH intervention.)

Objectives of the post-deployment support intervention

During a post-deployment support intervention, DMH workers focus on the following objectives:

- Offer workers an opportunity to talk and ask questions about their deployment.
- Prioritize staff with significant exposure-based risk factors, sub-threshold PTSD and/or substance abuse to identify individuals at risk for chronic reactions or new disorders from deployment.
- Provide information that may assist in identifying, anticipating and normalizing post-deployment reactions.
- Provide information that may assist in recognizing and building resilience—the worker’s ability to bounce back and adapt after difficult experiences.
- Establish an understanding of when it may be helpful to seek additional support, providing information about potential referral sources and how resources may be accessed.

Arranging opportunities for post-deployment support

There are several natural points at which contact can be directly offered or made available: when out-processing from a deployment, at the local chapter immediately after a deployment, a few weeks after a deployment or after a DAT response. Workers may speak with DMH workers during any of these opportunities. In cases where workers on a relief operation are asked to complete an out-processing sheet that includes a space to be initialed by a DMH worker, use the following guidance. The out-processing worker might or might not request post-deployment support when the DMH worker initials his or her out-processing sheet. The DMH worker should sign the sheet regardless of whether the worker wants to talk in detail about his or her experience. By signing the form when workers first approach, DMH is creating an environment in which workers will not feel pressured to discuss their experiences and may feel more at ease to seek support from the DMH worker. The DMH worker should identify any time and staff constraints at the beginning of the conversation, such as an impending flight departure or limited numbers of DMH workers helping a large number of workers. This step will put both the worker and the DMH worker in a position to make decisions about post-deployment support content. At times, out-processing is completed outside of the relief operation headquarters, such as at a chapter or service delivery site. If no DMH workers have been assigned to these sites, deployment of a DMH worker may be needed to facilitate out-processing. Under these circumstances, DMH supervisors are asked to remind site leadership of post-deployment support availability and the possible need for coordination of scheduling between out-processing workers and DMH staff. Identifying outprocessing dates in advance and coordinating with the Staff Services group will help DMH leadership plan for both headquarters and remote post-deployment support needs. If deploying DMH workers to remote sites is not possible, phone contact between headquarters DMH workers and out-processing staff is an acceptable alternative.

DMH workers are encouraged to collaborate with their local chapters to establish a system of post-deployment support whereby all disaster workers are informed before their deployment about the availability of post-deployment support when they return home. Some workers will take advantage of post-deployment support at that time, but others may not experience difficulties until weeks after their return from deployment or may not feel ready to speak with someone until much later. Local DMH workers may make phone calls to thank deployed workers, and ask if workers would like to share their overall experience with the DMH worker. The DMH worker can listen for worker risk factors and persistent stress reactions that may benefit from in-person contact with a DMH worker at the chapter on a voluntary basis.

After a DAT response, workers may experience reactions that are similar to those that sometimes occur after relief operation assignments. Chapters should educate workers regarding post-deployment support and how to access it by applying the previously discussed guidelines.

Conversation content

There is no set series of questions to be asked during post-deployment support conversations, regardless of when post-deployment support takes place. However, some guidelines have been established regarding what to address, as well as what not to ask or elicit. DMH workers should integrate the following elements into their practice of post-deployment support:

- At the beginning of the session, DMH workers should explain what a post deployment support conversation might entail, consistent with the guidelines below. This step helps establish informed consent.
- The DMH worker should use the conversation as an opportunity to thank the worker for his or her contribution.
- The worker chooses which aspects of the deployment experience will be discussed, if any.
- Post-deployment support contacts should not be debriefings in any form, nor should they specifically aim to elicit workers' feelings. When workers choose to share feelings relating to the experience, and time and privacy allow, the DMH worker may elect to help the individual process those feelings.
- There is not always sufficient time or privacy for effectively working through revealed feelings. In this case, the DMH worker is responsible for explaining these circumstances and helping the individual identify options for managing the feelings without fully processing them at that time. Given that post-deployment support—as with all DMH interventions—should not exceed three visits, issues that appear to need longer-term intervention should be referred out as soon as this circumstance is identified.
- If a worker has returned home, conversation content may focus more on transition and readjustment to life at home than on the deployment itself.

- The DMH workers should offer information about typical post-deployment reactions and reinforce risk factors from the PFA course as well as suggestions for making the transition as smooth as possible. The brochures referenced above can help facilitate such explanations. Discussion should include mention that the typical reactions listed are not exhaustive and that workers may experience other concerns or reactions.
- As the conversation draws to a close, the DMH worker should provide instructions for how to receive additional post-deployment support, should it be desired.

Tools and resources

As mentioned previously in this chapter, three different “Coping with Disaster” brochures are available to workers and families before, during or after deployment.

The Post-Deployment Stress Self-Assessment tool is an optional tool available to workers after an assignment and posted online. If the worker has performed the self assessment at the time of a post-deployment support conversation, the DMH may provide additional information, materials, resources and/or referrals as indicated.